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Statement submitted by Associated Country Women of the World and Soroptimist International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Social Protection for Women and Girls; Sustainability Through Education

It is vital that we redouble efforts to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda through programmes to educate, enable and empower women and girls at grassroots level, by advocating on behalf of women and girls with multiple disadvantages, to ensure that legislation, policies and actions are in place ensuring that none of them are left behind. One of the most powerful elements of the Sustainable Development Goals is that they interconnect. Simply put, we cannot achieve one Goal without invoking assistance from the others. Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) form a fundamental social protection platform from which all Sustainable Development Goals goals can assist women and girls around the world to move forward sustainably, progressing their status from the most vulnerable and poorest sectors of societies, to playing their rightful part in their communities.

Information from the World Inequality Database on Education in 2018 shows that gender gaps in attainment are generally found among the poorest families, especially in rural areas and among indigenous or ethnic minority groups. When combined these factors mean that girls facing these circumstances are least likely to access education even if it is available. There is an increasing urgency for barriers to be removed.

For every community the education of girls and young women leads to the increased economic productivity and income generation for her family and that community. By focusing on eliminating gender inequality in education, there will be gains in every other aspect of social, economic, cultural and political development, thus providing an underpinning social protection platform across all societies.

Investment in girls' education, especially if aimed at improving its quality and coverage, yields a social benefit that has resulted in lower mortality rates, fewer unwanted births, and efforts to combat poverty, HIV/AIDS, and malnutrition. Girls' school attendance contributes to a decline in violence and harmful practices toward women and girls as well as leading to increases in per capita growth.

Though there have been positive achievements, there are still numerous barriers facing girls or women who wish to pursue an education. Serious problems affecting the right to education persist in the discriminatory environment girls and women face on a daily basis. These barriers are often caused by poverty, harmful traditional norms and practices, poor infrastructure and violence. These barriers may surface on a daily basis from the moment a girl or woman wakes up to the time she goes to sleep.

Girls forced into early marriage often have diminished access to continuing education; girls who are expected to work on family farms or assist with collection of water may never go to school; if secondary education is available to girls then they may regularly be missing from the classroom because of lack of toilet facilities or taboos around menstruation. Millions of women and girls each year suffer from a lack of access to clean water, water-related diseases and lack of sanitation in communities and schools. The impact of climate change on water supply and collection is disproportionately affecting women and in particular those in rural areas.

Improvements to infrastructure such as transportation and school facilities are needed. In order to successfully pursue her education, a woman or girl must have access to safe and affordable transportation to travel to and from the educational venue. Once there, it must be an environment which provides everyone with access

to safe sanitation and hygiene facilities, taking into account the specific needs of young women and girls for menstrual hygiene management and of persons with disabilities, without compromising their safety and dignity.

A quality education accessible beyond primary stages can be regarded as one of the major pillars of social protection as this offers women and girls the opportunity to fulfil their potential, to engage in social entrepreneurship, or to find meaningful employment. The education of boys to understand not only the importance but the value of this equality is crucial. Preliminary results from the Global Survey of the Living Conditions of Rural Women undertaken by the International Forum on Rural Women indicate that 42.5 per cent of respondents in rural communities do not have access to secondary education (ages 11-16) in their immediate areas.

Training and skills, including access to modern technology are necessary for women and girls to achieve economic empowerment. Advances in information and communications technology, including telecommunications, computers and the Internet, have transformed the world, including in the field of education. There is a pressing need to address the major impediments that many countries face in accessing new technologies and bridging the digital divides, both between and within countries and between women and men. In addition to "harnessing" information and communications technologies for development, there is a recognised need to emphasize quality of access to bridge digital and knowledge divides, using a multidimensional approach that includes speed, stability, affordability, language, local content and accessibility for persons with disabilities. Programmes such as UNESCO's MIL CLICKS are critical for safe, informed and productive use of information technologies.

In 2018, a report by UN-Women confirmed that access to the Internet was increasing exponentially and being used to communicate and share information in school settings, in workplaces and at home. However, women were still not being reached at the same pace as men. According to a study by the UN-Women, in 2017- the proportion of women using the Internet globally was 5.9 per centage points lower than for men. Women and girls must not be victims of this digital divide if they are to be successful in pursuing an education or surviving globalization.

A healthy society requires access to knowledge and information in all forms of health education for women and girls research showing that this will lead to healthier families and communities. Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, said in 2010 that education and health go hand in hand. The evidence demonstrating the links is overwhelming. We know, too, that the education of girls brings an especially high payback for health. In this sense, education and health are a sisterhood.

Education is a powerful way to break the cycle of poverty, ill health, misery, and low status passed on from one generation of women to the next. UNESCO supports this view stating, "A good quality education is the foundation of health and well-being. For people to lead healthy and productive lives, they need knowledge to prevent sickness and disease. For children and adolescents to learn, they need to be ell nourished and healthy. Statistics from UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report show that the attainment of higher levels of education among mothers improves children's nutrition and vaccination rates, while reducing preventable child deaths, maternal mortality and HIV".

Failures in health systems, reactive policy making, and deeply rooted gender inequalities at family, community, and national levels have combined to create a devastating impact on women's health throughout her life cycle. Not only do women and girls face a specific set of health-related concerns, they also face sometimes insurmountable barriers to accessing services. Governments, communities, civil

society and individuals must work together to change attitudes and behaviours, inequalities, and system failures which negatively impact on the health of women and girls, with a focus on improving preventative and primary care.

Education enables women and girls to access information regarding reproductive and sexual rights and healthcare through all stages of their lives. The education of men and boys about the shared responsibility of child-bearing and other matters relating to sexuality and reproduction is also important. It is critical that men and boys are engaged in such educational programmes providing them with an understanding of the rights of women and girls over choices for their own bodies and their own lives. This in turn can provide protection from early marriage and Female genital mutilation and offer routes for release from domestic violence and other forms of abuse, both mental and physical.

Monitoring programs is important. It is critical that statistics are collected which are thorough and transparent, using gender sensitive statistics and indicators. Gender specific statistics are fundamental as a means to develop appropriate financing strategies, for the fulfilment of human rights and gender equality commitments and to monitor progress toward Sustainable Development Goals targets.

In order to take into account gender-specific disadvantages and needs, it is important to compile gender disaggregated data in many other areas, e.g. the distribution of property and assets between women and men, sensitive issues like gender-based violence. Gender-sensitive indicators will specify whether inequality between the sexes has increased or decreased over time, e.g. in the employment sector, indicators measure access to productive resources or wage ratios.

Such categories of data and indicators should be collected nationally, regionally and globally in order to measure gender gaps and consequently adjust development programmes to rectify inequalities and to ensure women's empowerment and provide social protection floors. At a minimum, data disaggregated on the basis of age, sex, geography, income, disability, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities (including multiple inequalities experienced by women and girls) should be available to inform of the progress toward 2030.

Nationally appropriate Social Protection systems and measures including social protection floors have been recognized as playing an important part in addressing the poverty and vulnerability of women, children, older persons, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities. Social protection floors have great potential in facilitating the enjoyment of the rights to education, social security, health, food, shelter, and water, in accordance with the obligations of States under international human rights law. When used as a floor and not a ceiling for protection, social protection floors can contribute significantly to gender equality and the realization of minimum essential levels of those rights especially for marginalized groups.

Social protection is seen as an investment in people and thus in long-term social and economic development. Nationally appropriate social protection systems and floors make a critical contribution to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals aimed at poverty eradication and exerting a positive impact on economic growth, social cohesion and social development. They have an essential role to play in building resilient and environmentally friendly societies, supporting removal of inequalities emphasised by gender.

For decades, Member States have been entering into agreements and adopting resolutions which provide for many forms of social protection for women and girls. However, for many women and girls personal and family safety, access to education, economic security, food security, safe shelter and a healthy life are a long way from being achieved. It is no longer acceptable that action has not been taken or is

implemented slowly. In order to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda, Governments must immediately act on the promises given so that no one is left behind.

We stro gly urge Member States to implement all previously agreed resolutions which provide the social protection floors to enable women and girls to move out of poverty and vulnerability to leading well educated and dignified lives as contributing members of their communities.

This statement is endorsed by the following ECOSOC-accredited organisations:

Widows for Peace through Democracy

Women for Water Partnership

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts

Zonta International